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Vladimov's View of the Situation in the USSR

1. Introduction and Summary: During a recent lecture tour in the US, the Soviet emigre writer Georgii N. Vladimov has argued that, before the decade is out, the Soviet economic plight will impel the leadership to choose between major reforms or a war intended primarily to justify continuing hardships to the population. The military will play a key role in the choice and there is a 50-50 chance that its reform-minded elements will prevail on the political leadership to adopt a reformist course.

Vladimov The Man.

2. Born in 1931, Vladimov enrolled in a Suvorov military prep school during World War II out of patriotic fervor. He later embarked on a literary career. His first novel, published in 1961, dealt with the life of the common man and won him a large following. But in the ensuing years he fell victim to the party hacks who control literature and had increasing difficulty having his works published. In 1967 he publicly defended Solzhenitsyn and in 1977 resigned from the Writer's Union in protest against its expulsion of a number of nonconformist writers. He became Chairman of Amnesty International's Moscow section, and engaged in a courageous, prolonged cat-and-mouse game with the authorities who tried alternatively to pressure and cajole him into using his talent in ways acceptable to the regime. Instead he became increasingly involved in the activities of what he calls the Russian party, but which might more accurately be called the Russian movement.

3. The origins of the movement go back to the 1960s, when a number of moderately prominent people inside and outside of the ruling structure became concerned with the continued wholesale destruction of historically significant monuments and buildings. The regime responded to this concern by allowing the formation of the All-Russian Society for the Preservation of historical and Cultural Monuments. The Society's offices became the unofficial meeting place of like-minded people whose concerns extended beyond those that had brought the Society into being. Roughly put, the movement developed and propagated two main ideas: a) the preservation of Russia's historical heritage and the ecological environment and b) the devotion of all financial resources for the development of the country's economy rather than for costly and useless foreign adventures such as Cuba, Angola, Afghanistan, etc. The movement had and continues to have adherents in many spheres of Soviet life. Vladimov's most interesting personal contacts were with his friends from military days who were now becoming colonels and many of whom sympathized with the movement's goals.

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4. Vladimov's direct contacts with the members of the movement naturally stopped in June 1983 when he was forced to emigrate. But his current views are clearly shaped by his earlier analysis that led him to become part of the movement in the first place and by his exchanges with the movement's other adherents. As the newly appointed editor of the emigre journal Grani, he sees as his principal goal the furthering of a dialogue among all Russians who would like to see a major change in the policies of that country's government. The following summary of Vladimov's views is based on the talk he gave at the State Department, his answers to questions from the audience, and a long private discussion with him.

Vladimov's Analysis of The Current Situation and Prospects for Change.

5. By the late 1970s the Soviet economy had exhausted its potential for growth under its current form of organization. In agriculture this point had been reached earlier. But in a more repressive era, this agricultural crisis could be kept hidden as collective farmers were prevented from travelling to the cities and in effect lived close to starvation levels in the countryside. In the 70s, however, they began coming to the cities to shop, not only revealing their plight to more people, but laying bare store shelves in the cities so that the standard of living for city dwellers began to go down as well. The inadequacy of food and consumer good production, which is but the most visible part of a wider economic crisis, became palpable for all in 1980. Public grumbling became more widespread, and more thoughtful people began to think more deeply about the causes of the problem and possible remedies. The year 1980, therefore, represents an important divide in public sentiment about the Soviet economy.

6. The regime's timetested response was to attribute all economic problems to the arms race imposed upon the country by the West. But popular acceptance of this explanation could last only so long and is now giving way to popular anger -- anger which will be all the harder to control because people have already turned to the second economy to live and have therefore slipped partially out of government control. The government, of course, will temporize for as long as it can by playing up the imperialist war threat and attempt to muddle through economically. But, in the long run, it has no choice: It will be impelled to choose between reform or a war designed to deflect popular anger and preserve regime legitimacy.

7. The military will have to be consulted and will play a key role in the government's eventual decision. But the military is not a monolith, as can be seen in its attitudes toward the war in Afghanistan. Roughly speaking, there is a similarity of view between young officers and the general officer corps in that both see the war as an opportunity for personal advancement. On the other side are those who oppose the war: enlisted men because they have nothing to gain by it and much to lose and a number of lieutenant colonels and colonels because they see it as disastrous for Russia on strategic, economic, and moral grounds. These colonels represent Russia's best hope.

8. Logically, one could expect that at least some generals would feel the same way as these colonels. But there is a great chasm between general officers and the rest of the officer corps. Below the rank of general there are many officers who can evaluate the country's situation objectively and speak honestly among themselves. Still, as long as they do their jobs well and don't dissent openly from official views, in due time they get promoted up to the grade of colonel. The KGB, incidentally, is well aware of the quietly held dissenting views held by many officers. It also realizes that it can no longer maintain good control over the officer corps operating solely from the well known special sections of the KGB inside the military. It has therefore worked out a plan to have 30% (thirty percent) of the regular officer corps composed of KGB officers, that is, of officers trained in military specialties but selected by the KGB and dependent solely upon it for promotions. That plan was approved while Brezhnev was still alive and is probably being implemented today. Regardless of whether the KGB is able to reign in dissent in the officer ranks, the party today is still able to screen out politically questionable officers during the general officer selection process. As a result, virtually the only colonels promoted to generals are political demaguoges, secret informers, and toadies. With few exceptions, their dominant motivation is their own and their families' welfare. However they have to rely on their staffs to prepare position papers and this may eventually give colonels an important say in major political decisions. Consequently, colonels who already occupy important positions, especially in the General Staff, have the best opportunity of eventually bringing about important changes in government policies. They can orient the General Staff in a positive direction and the Politburo, faced with unprecedented difficulties, may feel it has to accept military recommendations.

9. Although less likely, the impetus for change could also come from someone other than colonels. It is possible that a military hero will emerge even from an otherwise unsuccessful Afghan war, be promoted to general, and influence the political leadership directly. Alternatively change may originate from within the political leadership. But that is highly doubtful as few people who reach the top positions are likely to suggest fundamental changes and, if by chance they do, they are likely to be put down by the system and unable to generate enough pressure against it. Kulakov, Gorbachev's predecessor as Party Secretary for Agriculture is a case in point. He tried to convince the Politburo that increased agriculture production could only come through increasing private plots, was excoriated for his views, and committed suicide. (Comment: Kulakov's death in 1978 was officially attributed to a heart attack. Vladimov's version of it is new to me.)

10. The Russian movement has not worked out in any detail what reforms should entail since, up to now, its actions had been of a defensive nature and intended to prevent the government from further despoiling the Russian

land. But, even short of a full program, it is clear that the immediate necessity is to increase the private agricultural sector. Many colonels feel themselves close to the land and agree with this concept. They also believe the country has quite enough weapon systems and could divert some financial resources away from military production.

11. The possibility of bringing about real change in the Soviet system hinges in great part on the course of the Afghanistan war. Historically change has often come to Russia as a result of foreign misadventures. The Afghan war could also serve as such a catalyst, but only if the Soviets continue to have as little success as they have to date -- and that is the hope of those who want reform. On the other hand, should the Soviet Union be able to achieve at least a perceived victory, the proponents of reform will be greatly weakened and the regime will probably seek a way out of its continuing internal difficulties through another military adventure, possibly against Pakistan but most likely against Iran. Aggression there would be much less risky than moves against either Europe or China, could use as its popular justification the need to defend the southern frontiers against the Muslims, and would present the prospect of conquering the Iranian oil fields.

Vladimov's Views on the Role of the West

12. The greatest impetus that the West could give for reform would be an industrial embargo (not grain as it is immoral to deny food to people.) But such an embargo is unlikely because of Western competition for markets. However, there are at least three more positive things the West can do:

-- Maintain a tough posture vis-a-vis the Soviet leadership, as Reagan, Thatcher, and Mitterand are doing.

-- Continue to support radio broadcasts. They play a tremedous role in encouraging informed dialogue in the Soviet Union. The West should not mislead itself into thinking that the virtual disappearance of samizdat means that dissent and dialogue have ended. Rather, Soviet citizens who wish to express unofficial views now find it more effective to get them to the West for publication and eventual reimportation into the Soviet Union in professionally produced journals and books. The widespread dissemination of these publications inside the Soviet Union once they get to Moscow and Leningrad is well illustrated by those records of police searches that reach the West. They reveal that these publications in whole or in part, are turning up in remote Russian towns and cities.

-- Encourage defections from the Soviet army in Afghanistan and provide a safe haven for defectors. This would be a dual blow to the Soviets. It would be an ideological blow in that political officers would claim that any Soviets falling into Mujahadin hands were executed, whereas soldiers would learn by word of mouth that it was not so. And it would further complicate military operations and thus provide encouragement to those in the military who oppose the war. But defectors should not be used in military operations against the Red Army as that would be considered outright treason and be counterproductive.

Comment

13. Vladimov's characterization of the Soviet leadership dilemma as either reform or war is shared by some observers (for instance, Edward Luttwak), but is rejected by most analysts. It is indeed very stark. I have heard it attributed to Lieutenant General Milshteyn (retired) of the USA Institute. It may indeed be the way some official and unofficial Soviets think about the country's problems when they approach them in a theoretical way. But I doubt very much that Soviet leaders would frame the issue that way. It is much more likely that they will try to avoid such hard choices and not consciously plan a war in order to escape from their economic plight. This, of course, does not exclude the possibility of the Soviet Union initiating a war for a host of reasons.

14. Judgments about Vladimov's reform-war dichotomy should not cloud one's views of his comments about the economy, popular dissatisfaction, and would-be reformers in the military--all of which are based on direct observation and can therefore be treated independently of his analytical judgments about Soviet leadership choices. His description of the worsening plight of the consumer and more open grumbling about it have been related to me by a number of reliable observers of the Soviet scene, including one KGB defector who, for good measure, added that KGB officers inwardly sympathized with the complaints when they heard them in their off-duty time while waiting in store lines. Indeed, the realization by at least some members of the Soviet establishment of the new pervasiveness and intensity of dissatisfaction may account for the prolonged debate in Soviet journals about the nature and potential significance of contradictions in socialist societies. As regards the emergence of would-be reformers in the military, a number of western analysts have advanced the hypothesis that this might happen as the Soviet officer corps became better educated. Vladimov's direct observation indicates the hypothesis has some validity. The possibility of these officers bringing about change is another question and would not seem to be as good as Vladimov hopes, particularly if his description of the general officer corps is correct.

15. What is most interesting about Vladimov is that he is, notwithstanding his dissident-expellee status, an authentic Russian and probably quite representative of one of the mindsets at work in the Soviet Union against the present order. Thus, the following attitudes of his are most likely representative, not unique:

-- The system is failing.

-- The system will be forced to make some drastic choices -- muddling solutions will be tried but won't work.

-- There is a mood of apocalypse in the air. An economic crisis is apocalyptic. War is apocalyptic. From the system's point of view, so is reform. The power structure could be changed drastically.

-- The army is looked to as the repository of national values and salvation. (The colonels are the army; the generals have sold out.)

-- Until internal saviors appear, Russia's salvation depends on the strength and patience of her enemies!

-- As usual, sadly, no really political program or even principles are asserted. Vladimov says it is too early for that. I suspect that the KGB also pounces whenever some individuals move from idealistic thinking to political planning.

Still, it may be that popular despondency, regime ineptitude in all matters save repression, and intellectual ferment are creating a climate under which change is becoming a greater possibility than it was a few years ago.

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